

CAUGHT FOR LIFE
Luke 5:1-11
A Sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
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JESUS CALLS THE FISHERMEN. I remember hearing this story as a child – about Elijah’s age. There was song . . . do you know the song? “*I will make you fishers of men . . . if you follow me.*” Those are the only lyrics – lots of repetition in the song . . . all the emphasis on becoming fishers of men with one condition: follow Jesus. I confess that for me, the story has long remained a *Bible Story* about men with nets and boats and calloused hands. Men who got up from their work to follow Jesus, who had come to them one day and invited them to follow. I liked the story. Liked its metaphor about catching people, which was cute, I thought, for fisherfolk.

But recently my friend Patrick Willson started poking at the metaphor, and it became less cute. “Fishers of people,” he mused:

you drop the net over the side of the boat, circle around, then pull in the net, haul it up and over the side, and what do you get? You get a mass of living, flopping fish. But wait a minute. They will stop flip-flopping. They will be quiet and still . . . and dead. The nets of “fishers of people” are hardly a happy image of evangelism. Is that it? We transform bright, shining, flip-flopping creatures into something grey and [glassy-eyed] and dead?¹

If you have *any* negative feelings about evangelism, this will probably resonate.

But when Luke recorded this story, he used an uncommon word to show what Jesus meant when he said, “You’ll be catching people.” He used the Greek word *zogron*, from the root *zoe* – which means life! – like in zoology, the study of *living* creatures. In this story Jesus uses *zoe* as a verb. To enliven. To bring to life. To take alive. Nothing captured is put onto ice according to Luke. People are to be caught *for life*.

The story provides some clues about the shape of the life Jesus has in mind. It’s the life he has been preaching about, for one thing – the “word of God” he’s been proclaiming to the crowds on the seashore. It must resemble the word Jesus read to the people in his synagogue back home: “The Spirit of the Lord . . . has anointed me [he said] to bring good news to the poor. [God] has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Release. Sight. Freedom. Favor. This is the life Jesus has in mind.

I love the way Martin Luther King, Jr. imagined it when he said:

One day, youngsters will learn words they will not understand.
Children from India will ask: What is hunger?

¹ Patrick Willson in a paper presented to the 2010 gathering of the Moveable Feast.

Children from Alabama will ask: What is racial segregation?
Children from Hiroshima will ask: What is the atomic bomb?
Children at school will ask: What is war?
You will answer them. You will tell them:
Those words are not used anymore, like stage coaches, galleys or slavery,
words no longer meaningful.
That is why they have been removed from dictionaries.

It's a big vision, isn't it? Seemingly impossible. But in Luke, this big vision is linked to a big miracle – one that can help us to envision the life Jesus offers . . . one that might lend us confidence that it *is* possible. Here Jesus the carpenter guides seasoned fishermen into the deep water where they have been fishing all night. At his cue they let down their nets for the biggest catch of their lives. A miracle catch – so many fish that their nets began to break . . . *piles* of fish – enough to sink two boats! Fish is what everyone ate back then – a staple, like bread. Like manna in the wilderness. This was more food than they had ever seen in one place. *Children will ask "What is hunger?" Those who have been caught for Jesus' life will tell them "That word is not used anymore. It is no longer meaningful."*

That catch of fish was astounding. *Just as astounding* is what Jesus offers to the fishermen: gifts of forgiveness, acceptance, responsibility. These too characterize the life that Jesus offers.

I can't remember where I read this – CS Lewis, I thought (it's been years) – but I still remember this comparison. Suppose you were at the grocery store one day, and you happened to run into – President Obama, let's say. (It was the Queen of England, I'm pretty sure, in the story I read.) Suppose the President began asking you for your opinion about all kinds of things. Imagine he listened carefully to you, spoke plainly about his own concerns with you, began to describe a plan to you, and asked for your help. He had an important job, he said, *for you*. Imagine how that might feel – the surprise of it all. Imagine the honor of being heard . . . the honor and responsibility of being asked to help . . . the assurance that you could do it; the President had confidence in you. It would be akin, I think, to Peter's experience – the shock of Christ's invitation to come share his work. What an awesome responsibility.

In a workshop yesterday Sara Miles called this evidence of God's sense of humor – that God uses us to do God's work. "We aren't the best way to get something done," she said, "if you're the creator of heaven and earth." Still God wants us. God calls and uses us.

There are a couple of things it is essential for disciples to do. The first thing, I believe, is to accept the *zoe* – the life Jesus offers – the blessing of it, the vision of it, the challenge of it. This is harder than it sounds. Today's affirmation of faith underlines some of the temptations that can keep us from living a Christ-like life. We distort the gospel, it says, "by weakening its promises or demands, by identifying it with oppressive structures, by pointing to ourselves instead of Christ." So we put the gospel on ice, in a

way. And when we do, it doesn't work right. It does not convey the life that God means for us, and for everything God made.

But it isn't just the challenging parts of the gospel we have trouble receiving. Even the blessings of God can be hard to accept. I'm reminded of the letter Fra Giovanni wrote a friend many years ago – what's rather famous now. He said,

There is nothing I can give you, which you have not; but there is much, very much, that while I cannot give it, you can take.
No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in today.
Take heaven!
No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in this present instant.
Take peace!
The gloom of the world is but a shadow. Behind it, yet within our reach, is joy.
Take joy!

Fra Giovanni wrote that letter because his friend was having such trouble taking God's heaven, God's peace, God's joy. Why? She was lost in some kind of darkness, apparently – beset by trials, consumed by sorrows, overcome by duties that made her life difficult to bear. But in the darkness Giovanni perceived a kind of glory, and he wanted his friend to see it, too. Beneath the trials he saw a kind of wisdom. Around the duty he detected God's overshadowing presence. Even human joy, he said, conceals diviner gifts, but we have to look carefully to see He urged his friend to look and see.

It's hard – maybe even rare – to receive God's gifts, as distracted as we can be sometimes, and as stubborn or as sad. That's what I thought when I went to Charlotte Reynolds' memorial service a few weeks ago: that her family was remarkable in their ability to receive God's gifts. Some members of this church were close to Charlotte and heartbroken when she died at the age of four. At her memorial service, the Reynolds' minister spoke of the love that was helping to carry Charlotte's family through the hard times. It brought them into the "thin places," he said, where God's light shines in the darkness and God's presence is surely felt. Surrounded by a community of friends, Charlotte's family had managed to take heaven, even as they were going through hell. Upheld by the promises of faith, they somehow took peace. Mindful of the gift Charlotte was, they also took joy. And the heaven, the peace, the joy they took is available to every one of us . . . *if we follow* Christ.

To follow him is a life-long endeavor. It's what we're about as we worship, as we study, as we serve – particularly in the church. We are learning to receive God's life – and all the related gifts and responsibilities.

One of the responsibilities evident in this story is to *share* the life we've found – to catch others for the life that we enjoy. Missionaries do this. The folks our Global Missions offering will support – the ones who preach in India and build schools in Congo and bind up wounds in Haiti – they are catching people for life, and it's a privilege to be part of their ministry by supporting them. But this is not just something meant to happen

far away or long ago. There is a way in which Jesus stands before us, too, here and now – calling us to share his life with others.

Sharing God’s life – God’s forgiveness, compassion, and love – can be done without actually *talking* about Jesus. Evangelism by *deed* is the kind I think most of us like best. But to proclaim the gospel *in word* as well as deed can be important sometimes, though it’s challenging even for ministers.

I had to laugh when I read Martin Copenhaver’s admission that sometimes he says he’s an attorney instead of a minister, just to avoid the conversations that can result when he tells people he’s a pastor. When they learn he’s a minister, people make annoying assumptions, Copenhaver says – about everything from his morals to his sense of humor. They want to talk about how they’re spiritual, but not religious . . . how they don’t believe in a God who created the universe in seven days . . . or all the strange and destructive things some people do in the name of God. So many people have a shallow understanding of God and the church, says Copenhaver; they assume Christians are shallow, too! To tell people you love Jesus or go to church can be risky; who knows what they’ll think of you?

But then Copenhaver tells about a time he was forced to admit he was a minister – oddly, in the middle of a Boston club, during a performance by the jazz trumpeter, Chris Botti, who noticed Copenhaver for some reason and asked him, “What do you do?” (*I’m a pastor . . .*) After the show a number of people approached Copenhaver. One was a woman who said her brother lived near Copenhaver’s church. “I’m going to suggest he visit,” she said. “He’s had a real rough time with a divorce, and he’s got custody of the kids.” Another woman said, “My mom’s in the hospital and she may never leave. Cancer. Her priest has been in to see her, but would you be willing to pray for her?” Others came just to share what was going on in their lives. They wanted to talk to a minister. “And to think,” Copenhaver said later: “none of those conversations would have taken place if I had said that I was a lawyer.”²

Good things can happen when we dare to speak about Christ – *naming* what is at the root of the life we know and celebrate here . . . naming *the source* of the joy, the peace, the heaven we sometimes manage to take. Through us people can glimpse the abundance God offers them. People can get caught *for life*. *You and I* can catch them . . . *if we follow*. If we accept Christ’s invitation – the life and the job that Jesus offers us. This is not just a Bible Story. Jesus stands here, too – in this place, along our little shoreline. And his call is to me, and to you: *I will make you fishers of people . . . if you follow me*.

² “So You’re a Minister” in *This Odd and Wondrous Calling*, pp 43-50.